

Special report: As crashes rise, suburbs push to build in safety for walkers, cyclists

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Editor's note: This is the second of a continuing series on the rise of bicyclist and pedestrian fatalities in the suburbs.

Three miles from home, cyclist Patty Brummet paced herself. This training ride was all about building endurance for a trek across the U.S. she'd planned.

Just ahead, a driver in a parked car flung open the door. Brummet rode right into it, smashing into the steel frame and catapulting into the roadway near Glencoe, her helmet cracking in three places.

She woke up hours later in a hospital with a chipped shoulder bone, a concussion and massive bruising.

"You can't depend on the driver noticing you," said Brummet, who returned to marathon biking after her March 2016 crash but still has vision problems.

And yet, Brummet is relatively lucky. A Daily Herald analysis of suburban vehicle crashes with cyclists and pedestrians found 250 were fatal and 9,290 involved injuries from 2012 through 2015.

And instead of declining, in 2015 suburban collisions rose 3 percent and fatal collisions spiked by nearly 13 percent, according to the most recent Illinois Department of Transportation data.

A number of communities are trying to reverse the trend, although most remedies are costly and some may give rise to other problems.

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You have to be a "defensive walker," says Chicagoan Henry Monte, a pedestrian in Elk Grove Village's industrial area. - Marni Pyke | Staff Photographer

Bensenville is building an ambitious series of asphalt paths to run alongside key arterial streets after experiencing 11 crashes between vehicles and bicyclists or pedestrians in 2015, including a fatal collision between 86-year-old pedestrian Modesta De La Rosa and a pickup truck that didn't stop.

This fall, workers completed the first path along Church Road, a busy two-lane street.

Coming next are paths on Route 83 and Thorndale Avenue so walkers and cyclists "won't have to do battles with the semis," Community and Economic Development Director Scott Viger said.

The downside of bike paths comes when they end, the Active Transportation Alliance concludes in its "Suburban Bikeways for All" report.

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Bensenville is installing a path for bicyclists and walkers next to Church Road as part of a comprehensive bike plan. - Bev Horne | Staff Photographer

The Chicago area boasts about 4,000 miles of trails and paths, but 142 miles of gaps in the system create a stressful and dangerous environment for riders, runners or pedestrians spilling out onto busy streets, the Alliance reports.

The Lake County Forest Preserve District tried for decades before closing a one-third-mile gap in the Des Plaines River Trail that forced users onto busy Milwaukee Avenue. But other gaps exist in Wheeling and Prospect Heights.

Across the region, some gaps are caused by owners who won't sell land or by roads changing jurisdiction, such as from a town's control to the state's, Alliance Advocacy Director Jim Merrell said. But gaps shouldn't occur "if communities are implementing a thoughtful and comprehensive active transportation plan."

The cost of safety

One recent extension of the Des Plaines River Trail in Lake County was estimated at \$350,000 a mile, and that doesn't include land acquisition.

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Tony Waters, left, and Paul Rudden, husband and brother of Rosaleen Water, who died while trying to cross Higgins Road on her bike, describe how Elk Grove Village worked to erect a bridge over the high-speed road to prevent other crashes. - Bob Chwedyk | Staff Photographer
A pedestrian and bicycle bridge over four-lane Higgins Road in Busse Woods near Elk Grove Village cost \$2.7 million. Planned for years, it became a priority after Rosaleen "Rose" Waters was struck and killed as she biked across Higgins in May 2013.

When Rose didn't return from her morning ride, "I thought her bike must have broken down," said her husband, Tony. Around noon, five police officers and a chaplain came to his door holding Rose's phone. "That was a pretty tragic thing to hear," Waters said.

The bridge, which received \$2.2 million in federal funds, brings some solace to Waters. "Countless close calls and near-misses have been eliminated," he said.

Algonquin spent years contemplating a similar bridge on Randall Road, but the village shelved it in 2012. Revived last year as a pedestrian underpass, the project will need federal aid, which often is the only way such structures can be built.

Two downtowns

Arlington Heights' downtown is a "walkers paradise," according to a Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning assessment.

But high-volume, high-speed arterial streets such as Arlington Heights, Rand and Dundee roads, missing sidewalks, and multilane crossings earned the village a low CMAP walkability score. The village had 31 bike and pedestrian crashes in 2015 and its first fatality in three years, when Barbara Leinonen, 57, was struck and killed by a 16-year-old driver as she walked in a crosswalk.

Safety advocates hope to change that after Arlington Heights officials in September recommended bike paths, more sidewalks and "traffic calming," with pedestrian islands and speed bumps that protect people on foot and hinder high-speed driving.

The goal is to create "a community where all destinations can be reached comfortably and safely by walking and bicycling," Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Commission Chairman Juergen Juffa said.

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Des Plaines is trying to prevent crashes in town including this problematic stretch of Miner Street/Route 14 that combines high traffic with a busy Metra station and Pace bus stop. - Bob Chwedyk | Staff Photographer

Des Plaines' downtown also attracts plenty of people on foot, but it's bisected by a hazardous stretch of Route 14/Miner Street that combines high traffic volume with a Metra station and a popular Pace bus stop. Des Plaines had 42 collisions in 2015 between bicyclists or walkers and vehicles.

Officials hope crosswalks with flashing lights and eventually moving the bus stop to a safer location will help, police Sgt. Colin Johnson said.

But part of that approach is controversial in Mount Prospect. The village erected a flashing amber light at a problematic crosswalk on busy Central Road in 2016 in hopes of improving safety. When an oblivious SUV driver hit and killed Joni Beaudry as she was cycling to a park, her family and many residents said what's known as a rectangular rapid flashing beacon offers a false sense of security to bicyclists and walkers.

A car culture

Many bikers and pedestrians feel like endangered species, at odds with the car culture of the suburbs.

As semitrailer trucks rumbled past one morning, Henry Monte walked south along Route 83 in Elk Grove Village.

It's 20 minutes on foot from a Pace bus stop to his warehouse job. The exercise "is a great way to clear your head," but even though there are sidewalks and Illinois law gives pedestrians the right of way, crossing eight lanes of Route 83 where speeds surpass 50 mph is hazardous.

"You have to be a defensive walker," Monte said. "You have to be careful because you don't want to be hit by a car. I think some of them (drivers) probably think they have the right of way, but it's the other way around."

Tom Lucas of Hoffman Estates assumes the worst of drivers, a precaution that might have saved his life.

The Bike Palatine Club member was leading a group of cyclists this summer when a driver on the phone exited a strip mall just feet away.

"I yelled at everyone to stop," he said. "By the time I stopped I was less than three feet away from her car. She never would have seen us. She never looked left or right to see if anyone was coming."

Conversely, suburban driver John Behof is edgy about cyclists he describes as weaving in and out of traffic or blowing stop signs.

"They just assume the car will stop. Cars blow through stop signs, too," said Behof, of Kildeer. "I see bike riders all the time assume the car is going to do the right thing."

It's not always the drivers' fault, agrees Dave Simmons, instructor and president of Friends of Cycling in Elk Grove Village. He thinks the increase in crashes correlates to more cyclists venturing out, including novices.

"A cyclist riding with earbuds or not signaling ... they're their own worst enemy," Simmons said. "You have to be defensive. You have to be smart."

